

LTC Dennis Doyle, commander of the 421st Medical Battalion in Wiesbaden, Germany, said his unit is "the best ground and air evacuation unit anywhere."

He has good reason to think so.

Over the past eight years, the battalion has earned the coveted LTG Ellis D. Parker award as the best Army aviation battalion in the combat service support category six times, most recently from 1997 through 2000, consecutively.

Aviation battalions Armywide compete in combat, combat support, combat service support and TDA categories, while medevac units compete in the combat service support category only, Doyle said.

Units are judged on leadership, training, maintenance and safety standards. At press time, the 2001 winner had not yet been announced.

The battalion's success can be attributed largely "to where we are and what we do," Doyle said. As the only medical-evacuation battalion in Europe's Central Region, the 421st deployed to the Balkans when Task Force Hawk was formed in response to initial unrest in Albania, and the unit only returned from Kosovo in June of 2001.

It was the battalion's longest-term deployment, Doyle said, with elements of the battalion and its 45 UH-60A



Soldiers of the 421st Med. Bn.'s 557th Med. Co., a ground ambulance unit, undergo frequent training for missions that could occur at any time.

Air-Land Ambulance

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer

Black Hawk helicopters and 40 ground ambulances rotating in and out over the past five years.

Its soldiers provided command and control of subordinate units; continuous air and ground medical-evacuation support; and other support to V Corps, U.S. Army, Europe, U.S. European Command and Southern European Task Force.

Because weather conditions in Kosovo often keep aircraft from flying, ground medical evacuation was critical.

The 557th Medical Company is the only 40-ambulance ground-evacuation unit in the active Army, said SFC Steven Seitz, platoon sergeant of the company's 2nd platoon. It

has an excellent safety record, and its soldiers drove thousands of miles in Kosovo without any accidents, Doyle added.

The forward support medical company is generally located about four hours away from the combat support hospital, said 2LT Brian Balcerak. "So we set up an ambulance exchange point at a location about two hours from the CSH, with a four-man crew, a tent, and radios and antennas.

"Before patients arrived at the ambulance exchange point, a physician or physician's assistant had typically seen them, Balcerak said. "But, when they arrived at the AXP, they were still suffering from serious injuries. Our job was to transport them the rest of the way to the CSH."

"Medical evacuation is a harder task on the ground than in the air," Seitz said. "So our soldiers must have excellent land-navigation skills. They use the Global Positioning System, but they still have to calculate distances while bouncing around on the ground."

Additionally, soldiers at the AXP have to be able to treat patients who



UH-60A Black Hawk pilot CW2 Eric Gliba of the battalion's 159th Med. Co. prepares for a practice mission near Wiesbaden, Germany.

are bleeding heavily or having difficulty breathing, Balcerak said. "And we have to know how to treat casualties not only at the AXP, but inside the back of an ambulance."

Each M-997 ambulance accommodates two medics — one of whom is the driver — and four litter patients or six ambulatory patients.

The ground ambulances carry roll-

out litters that can be used to "scoop up" immobile patients, as well as spine splints, back boards, burn blankets, suction devices, oxygen and NBC equipment.

SGT James Conway said 16 people from the 557th shuttled between camps in Kosovo and Macedonia from November 1999 to April 2000.

"When the helicopters couldn't fly, we transported land-mine victims and pregnant women among bases, and to local hospitals," Conway said. "In six months, I imagine I went on 400 to 500 missions."

But not all the missions had happy endings, he said. Once, a special forces soldier died after being thrown from his vehicle. Another time, a Polish officer was killed while attempting to disable a land mine. Other times, the ambulance crew transported children injured by land mines.

Despite the tragedies he witnessed, Conway said, he was comforted by the fact that he was helping people.

In the background, but no less important, were the safety test pilots and mechanics from each of the 421st's

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three maintenance platoons. They spent countless hours keeping the aircraft ready to fly, said CSM Tim Burke.

"The flying part is the sexy part, but the pilots and air crews can't go anywhere without the unsung heroes," he said.

"After every 500 hours of flight time, we completely tear down an aircraft's engine and transmission," said 159th Med. Co. maintenance inspector SSG Daniel Price, one of 37 maintenance personnel responsible for the company's 15 helicopters.

Besides regular aircraft-maintenance requirements, his crew has to



Courtesy 421st Med. Bn.

One of the 421st's three air-ambulance companies was involved in relief efforts after an avalanche in Austria left thousands of people stranded.

ensure that the medical equipment aboard the aircraft — such as the rescue hoist and the “carousel” that holds the patients’ litters — is operational.

“Our main mission is to evacuate wounded soldiers,” Burke said. “We also keep a rear detachment in place to support families.”

In Kosovo, battalion air crews mostly evacuated other countries’ soldiers and transported them to the CSH. If the patients required care not available in Kosovo, “we medevaced them to Macedonia, where the Air Force picked them up for long-distance flights elsewhere,” Burke said.

The job doesn’t come without pain, Burke said. In Kosovo, in 2001, a child fell into a frozen river. “One of our guys was lowered by electric hoist into the freezing water. Unfortunately, he couldn’t find the little girl.”

Another real-life mission took several helicopters from the 159th Medical Co. — one of the 421st’s three air-ambulance companies — to Austria to aid in the evacuation of skiers trapped by an avalanche.

“We got the call about an avalanche about 2:30 a.m.,” said pilot CW2 Eric Gliba. “At 5 a.m. the

airlifting people out of the Tyrol Valley.

“Over a three-day period, flying eight hours a day, we got 400-plus people and one dog out,” Gliba said. The entire operation got about 7,000 people out.

There were four “lanes” of air-rescue traffic, Gliba said. “Our Black Hawks, Marine Corps helicopters, Austrian military helicopters and civilian aircraft. And above all of us were the news crews. People were flying above and below each other in round-robin fashion,” he said.

“And the snow was so deep,” Gliba said. “Our crew chief got off the helicopter one day and fell to his chest in snow trying to escort survivors.

“That was my first medevac mission since joining the unit in 1997,” Gliba said, “and it was one of the best missions I’ve done here, because I felt I was really helping out.”

He had other opportunities later on, following Task Force Hawk’s deployment to Albania. “We transported the remains of land-mine victims to the

Army’s base camp at Camp Bondsteel.”

Gliba also transported an 8-year-old girl with multiple gunshot wounds to Camp Bondsteel’s CSH.

And on July 4, 1999, Gliba was among rescuers in a tunnel near Camp Able Sentry, in Macedonia, where the first casualty after the air war — a U.S. soldier killed in a traffic collision — took place.

In 2000, elements of the battalion participated in 16 deployments in 13 countries, among them “Atlas Drop” an exercise in Tunisia, “Rescue Eagle” in Romania, “Victory Strike” in Poland and “Focus Relief” in

Nigeria, said Burke.

Air-evacuation medics and crew chiefs in the battalion can expect to be deployed 75 to 100 days a year, Burke said. And the unit’s OPTEMPO won’t be slowing down any time soon. “When the XVIII Airborne Corps

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leaves the Balkans in 2002, we’ll go back.”

Meantime, there are plenty of other critical missions to keep the battalion’s soldiers and equipment busy. With the U.S. war against terrorism now in its third month, aviation units are among those on highest alert.

Everyone hopes there won’t be a great need for medevac resources in conjunction with Operation Enduring Justice, Burke said, but the future is full of unknowns.

While the unit is not an official

Military Assistance to Safety and Traffic unit, it does respond to local emergencies and has practiced with German rescue-services personnel for such contingencies as train and highway accidents, Doyle said.

The battalion also supports the Army’s two major European training centers — the Combat Maneuver Training Center in Hohenfels and the Grafenwöhr live-fire ranges — as well as the Heidelberg and Würzburg MEDDACs. During exercises, the air-evacuation crews stay on-site round the clock.

The 421st’s soldiers also provide medical training to health-care providers and health care to the local population in host nations during NATO exercises, Burke said.

“In my 25 years in the Army, I’ve never been in a unit that’s so successful, so motivated,” Burke said. “These soldiers train because they know something is going to happen, not because they want to be ready just in case it does.” □



A Black Hawk pilot studies a map before his aircraft lifts off on a simulated casualty-recovery mission.



Soldiers of the 557th Med. Co. prepare to load a simulated casualty aboard their M997 ambulance during predeployment training.

Austrian government asked for our assistance to evacuate stranded tourists. At 9 a.m. we got three aircraft off the ground, hooked up with 12th Aviation Brigade aircrews from Giebelstadt, Germany, and headed to Innsbruck. The next day we began



SGT Dwayne Moore stows equipment before his aircraft leaves for a training mission utilizing “George,” a mannequin.